Timelines and Train Times: Finding Freedom In Necessity

The Ghost of Missed Opportunity

There is a way I like to think about mistakes. When I get something wrong, it can feel as though, in doing so, I am entering the wrong timeline. I don't mean that there are alternative realities that I could literally be inhabiting. It is simply this; there was an opportunity that I did not take and something is missing now because that opportunity is not flourishing, and the result is a feeling of emptiness, a kind of aimlessness. For example, if I fail to connect with someone due to hesitation or doubt, I find myself in a limbo, with nothing productive to do. If I miss an activity due to laziness, I find myself instead doing something half-heartedly and with little success.

This may sound familiar to you. It feels like I have to wait for the next opportunity to come along and hope that I do the thing that will get me into the right timeline, so to speak. I might miss it again, and keep missing it. There have been times when I have felt like I was walking in my own shadow, living in the shadow of who, and where, I was supposed to be.

This is something I have been trying to make sense of in the context of the fact that I do not exactly believe in free will and therefore I don't believe that it is ever possible for any of us to avoid the mistakes that we make. I think they were inevitable, hardwired into the fabric of reality. And yet I still have that sense of absence in those moments, the sense that something else is supposed to be happening, something that is missing because I failed to actualise it. My problem is this; if no other course of action was possible, and if I truly have conviction in my Vajrayana Buddhist and Spinozan perspective, why do I sometimes get this feeling of being out of sync and in the wrong timeline?

Choice and Regret in a Necessary World

To address this question I have been reflecting more deeply on Spinoza's pantheism and the 'Buddha-nature' teachings to see what they have in common, and what light they can shed on the question I am asking myself. As a Buddhist I am non-theist, though my philosophical leanings are Spinozan pantheism. This is because Spinoza's substance monism, that only one substance exists anywhere, and that it is the substance of God, has a closer affiliation with what many Buddhists would call emptiness or dharmatā, the suchness of reality, (and what Hindus would call Brahman) than it does with the God of the Abrahamic faiths.

This is why he has historically been called an atheist by some theologians. I think Spinoza had two qualities that explain this divergence. He was an an impeccable logician, and was also able to set aside all preconceived ideas about God, and simply go wherever the logic took him. Other theologians have not been so unbiased, clear-headed or courageous, or, like Descartes, have had more pressing reasons to postulate an active and sustaining creator. Instead there is a quite common trend to fit logic to the pre-established notions of what God is like.

Leibniz for example went to great lengths to refute Spinoza's understanding of God, not because he found fault in the logic, but because he did not want that version of God to be true. He did not accept a God that was not personal, that was not active and engaged. He defined God as necessary and everything else as contingent. The problem is that from a purely rational perspective such a move makes God more approachable, but less coherent.

For Spinoza, everything was necessary because everything was God. He began with something similar to a cosmological argument, noting that something necessary must exist as opposed to an infinite regress of contingent events. In rejecting atheism on these grounds Spinoza took theism in

a direction that feels quite natural if you are not aiming at proving the existence of a particular kind of God. He noticed that an infinite and necessary being must exclude the possibility of anything external and contingent.

To understand why, let's imagine ourselves as having our own private territory, our own 'castle of the self', so to speak, with a fence around it. This is our territory. This is who we are. God is relatable because he is out there rather than in here. But that creates a limit. God reaches the ring-fence of our essence and cannot cross it.

This creates an often overlooked and highly persuasive critique of the coherence of the scriptural monotheistic God which Spinoza was making very clear; if God is limitless, then there literally cannot be anything that isn't God. The existence of a single other being would represent a constraint and a limit on what is defined as unconstrained and limitless. Logically speaking therefore, a limitless God either does not exist or is everything. There is no middle ground.

This would mean that my sense of 'alternate timelines' is mistaken, since they could not be possible. If reality is infinite and necessary, there is no empty space where a different choice could have been made. There is no 'outside' to the present moment, where a better version of you is waiting or could have been living.

This view mirrors what we find in eastern traditions; no separation, no duality. There is no 'me and God', as fundamentally separate things. Everything is part of the same reality. As a result, free will, in the libertarian sense, does not really exist. Everything is preordained. Nothing can happen other than the way it actually happens because every instance of phenomena is of one substance and every being within that substance what Spinoza called a mode.

'You' and 'The Moment': The Reflection of Non-Duality

In some schools of Vajrayana Buddhism, a comparable notion is expressed in different terms. Buddha nature is already fully manifest. It is not a seed or an embryo that will appear in the future. Everything is sacred now. All we have to do is wake up to it. This is because we cannot create enlightenment; we cannot create our own optimal timeline. All we can do is understand the perfection of what is already taking place. From this perspective, enlightenment is not a future goal; it is something you already are.

For Spinoza, we cannot change our destiny; we can only become rationally aware of it manifesting. I have been reflecting on these views, both their similarities and differences, and this is the tentative conclusion I have reached: In choosing a particular course of action we are not creating or accessing one timeline over another. All we are doing is inhabiting the one that was necessary and is also ideal.

And yet it does often feel as if we missed the train, that we are not where we are supposed to be, that there is, or was, the possibility of a more successful version of ourselves where things worked out better. I am not saying that other timelines could have existed, only that we can feel the echo of them through an absence in the situation we find ourselves in—a reminder that something has gone wrong, that we are out of sync.

The wrong timeline is not a place you went; it is a fragmented view of where you actually are, the view from inside the castle of the self, the view that happens because you forget the castle and the

fence are illusions you are building. When we retreat into the private territory of the ego, we create a fence. From inside that castle, the right timeline looks like something we missed out there, but this feeling of empty aimlessness is actually the friction of trying to be a separate “kingdom within a kingdom” as Spinoza put it, in a universe that is a single, unified substance.

He would say that in these moments, we are experiencing the result of acting on inadequate ideas. We feel fragmented and acted upon by circumstances rather than acting from our own nature. When that happens, it feels as though we have missed the train. We are standing on the platform, waiting. What else is there to do? What I have been calling a wrong timeline is a useful fiction, a psychological shadow cast by our resistance to the present. When I feel like I am walking in my own shadow, I am not seeing a ghost of what could have been; I am feeling the weight of my self-inflicted enclosure.

But what if the missed timeline is not actually a tragedy at all. What if it is a diagnostic tool, the universe’s way of tapping us on the shoulder and reminding us to be brave, compassionate, active and available, an essential sign that our current perspective is too small to see the reality we are in. The missing piece is just clarity of insight. If you and the moment of your existence are the same thing, and if we live in a perfect reality, then at every moment, whether it feels like it or not, what is happening is ideal. This is a challenging idea, given the strength and scale of suffering that can be experienced. I am not saying that suffering is good for us, or that it is possible, in a moment of intense pain, to simply flick a perceptual switch and see your pain as ideal. That would be naïve.

But I am saying that I believe it to be true, that in any single instance it would be possible to take an optimal perspective on that moment. In this context, ideal does not mean pleasant; it means a moment that is complete and lacking nothing of the reality required for its existence. Finding the perspective to see that is sometimes near impossible of course, beyond something any human could do. At the other extreme, many of us do have experiences that seem quite idyllic. And then there is the full range in between, and it is there that I want to place some emphasis. Spinoza talks about acting rationally. My own interpretation of that is to look with open eyes, and do the very thing that the moment is inviting you to do. It is usually there, and the more you look for it, the easier it becomes to notice, the more you try to do it, the easier it becomes to enact. I am not sure exactly what Spinoza meant when he proposed we live rationally, but this is how I interpret that principle.

Both perspectives under discussion would agree with the view that ‘you’ and ‘the moment’ of your existence are exactly the same thing. ‘You’ are not something on this side of the equation, experiencing life happening to you out there. You are the totality of your experience. You are not a traveller passing through a landscape; you are a unique mode in the unified substance of God, or a manifest expression of the Dharmakaya. The goal is to see the moment of your life and enact it by dissolving the fence that was never even there. The missed opportunity isn’t a lost reality; it is an invitation to wake up to the one reality that is actually happening.

The Paradox of the Ticket

People often think compatibilism is as defeatist as determinism appears to be. They think that if everything is inevitable, then why bother doing anything at all? But that misses the point. We are walking a pre-ordered path, and yet doing so deliberately. We are doing the only thing we could possibly do, but we are doing so freely.

This is the paradox of freedom in necessity. Even if you were always destined to catch that train, the universe can't just teleport you onto the seat. It requires the mechanism of your legs walking, your heart racing, and your mind deciding, "I must run for this." The effort of choice is not an act of rewriting fate; it is the necessary process through which fate realises itself. The effort is simply how necessity happens.

For Spinoza, consistently catching the right train means living in accordance with reason. If you miss the train because of laziness or doubt, you are being determined by external causes, passive, fragmented, and out of sync. But if you catch the train because you understood you needed to be on it, you are being determined by internal reason. You are becoming what Spinoza calls the adequate cause of your own life. You are not changing your destiny, you are fully inhabiting it.

This is where the Spinozan mode meets Buddha-nature. Enlightenment is not a seed that will grow later; it is already fully manifest. Everything is sacred now. Our struggle is not to create a better timeline, but to wake up to the perfection of the one we are in.

We must go through the gruelling process of tuning into reason and making the difficult choice, only to discover, once we are seated, that it was the only train we ever had a ticket for. We didn't create a new timeline; we simply aligned ourselves with the only one that was ever real. We find that the right timeline wasn't a destination we travelled to, but a clarity of purpose that we live by. The echo of other timelines, that haunting sense of absence, was never a lost reality, but the sound of our own confusion, and a reminder to wake up. We were perfection itself all along; we just had to run fast enough to catch up to that fact.

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